Yes You Can! is a message of empowerment, determination, and affirmation. You will find that this book is an extraordinarily important part of the learning process you need to continue to grow as a person and as a vital member of your business community.

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• Why it is important to understand the significant differences between management and leadership
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• Some major challenges facing leaders today and how they can be solved

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CHAPTER

7 Practices to Increase Your Leadership Impact

by Scott Blessing

THE INTERVIEW

David Wright (Wright)

Scott Blessing is a sought-after leadership and executive coach who has gained a reputation for Changing the Game for developing dynamic, confident, and empowered leaders. His no-nonsense approach has helped successful leaders, teams, and organizations cause a measurable shift in culture and performance—beyond what was ever thought possible. He uses language reconstruction, Aikido principles, and a non-verbal language of strategy as delivery systems and a way of studying relationships, boundaries, and the practice of leadership. Scott is a frequent speaker for Fortune 500 companies, executive leadership forums, and industry conferences on topics of leadership presence, change, and influence.

Scott, welcome to Yes You Can.

Which issues are of paramount concern to today’s executives and leaders?

Scott Blessing (Blessing)

Today’s executives care about becoming an extraordinary leader, inspiring people to consistently achieve their best. They want to navigate calmly and wisely even
through turbulent situations—really connecting with people to expand their influence and create lasting change.

These are some key concerns I hear from leaders in my travels—executives who are being bombarded with tips and techniques from books and seminars about how to deal with their professional relationships, the pressures of work-life balance, “performance overwhelm,” and the isolation of being near the top. Yet of the $109 billion spent annually on development and training in the United States, *Business Week* says, “Studies show that the benefits of seminar-heavy schooling usually vanish within a few months.” And *Time* magazine goes on to estimate that 50 percent is utterly wasted. It’s time to focus on real shifts instead of quick fixes!

With more than twenty years of experience as an executive, entrepreneur, and CEO, I understand firsthand the pressures, relationship challenges, and isolation that leaders face. And this has allowed me to observe that leaders feel empty, drained, and unfulfilled despite their success. The epidemic of concerns that leaders face has been deeply troubling to me, especially when I see them being addressed in ways that have been insufficient to create the meaning, satisfaction, and sustainability today’s leaders want.

I also realized that the new environment of today requires people who are comfortable being at the center rather than the top, exercising intuitive and collaborative skills rather than commands—leaders whose words are consistent with their actions.

If individuals and organizations want to take new action, they must transform the habits and “business as usual attitudes” that keep them at their current level of performance. They need new understanding and new practices to generate different actions, new meaning, and a rekindling of organizational passion and loyalty. It is out of my commitment to help successful leaders take care of these concerns and achieve positive, lasting change for themselves and their teams that these seven practices have emerged.

**Wright**

So where do we start?

**Blessing**

**Practice Number 1: Commit to Recurrent Practice—What! Practice?**

In my journey to understand what it is to be a leader, I realized that first I needed to explore an even more essential question: what is it to be a human being? We are
biological beings and from that perspective, you are what you practice. Aristotle once said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit.”

A foundation of effective leadership, then, is a shift in mindset from “leadership” to “the practice of leadership.” Practice is not only relevant to leadership, it is imperative to producing effective leadership.

As a side note, pro basketball star Allen Iverson definitely wouldn’t agree. In this notable insane YouTube interview rant (www.youtube.com/watch?v=frrsId3goYYE&feature=related), Iverson spouts, “How the hell can I make my teammates better by practicing?”

Maybe you’re asking the same question—how will practicing make my leadership or team better?

Take a look at the areas of your life where you have created a level of skillfulness or mastery, whether that is a hobby, music, or sports. It could be something you do in your profession or driving a car or even cooking. What do you think is the common thread among all of those things that supported you in creating that level of skillfulness or mastery? That’s right, practice—recurrent practice.

Information doesn’t change behavior, practices do. Practice is a conscious choice to train ourselves to behave and act in a particular way until it becomes in our bones and part of who we are. In other words, it becomes embodied.

Whether we realize it or not, we’re always practicing something and in some sort of pattern or habit. And as we practice, we’re rewiring our nervous system with repetition and attention. Learning happens over time through recurrent practice. The good news is that we can consciously choose what we will practice.

In July of 2007, Harvard Business Review published research by Dr. Benjamin Bloom and his team at the University of Chicago that indicated there was no correlation between IQ and expert performance. Bloom further found that the following three key things correlate with success: 1) Superb performers practice intensely, 2) they study with a devoted teacher, mentor, or coach, and 3) they’re enthusiastically supported by families. Furthermore, the amount and the quality of practice were key factors in the level of expertise achieved. The evidence consistently and overwhelmingly shows that experts are made, not born.

Additional research has shown that it takes three hundred repetitions to achieve muscle memory (physically learn a task), and three thousand repetitions to embody a new behavior (get it in your bones). An example of this is learning to drive a stick shift car. With practice, and approximately three hundred repetitions, we can learn this task and perform it reliably. But you’ll need three thousand repetitions to actually get to
the point where you’re driving along and shifting gears *without even realizing you’re doing it.*

**Wright**

What gets in the way of practice?

**Blessing**

Author, researcher, and thought leader Dr. Robert Cooper speaks about a powerful force working against change. And it’s right in our own brain. The amygdala (“uh-mig-duh-luh”) is located in the limbic system—the ancient part of the brain and the one that deals with how we respond to the world around us.

The amygdala thrives on routine and doesn’t want anything to change. It craves control and safety, certainly essential in the face of danger. Yet the amygdala’s agenda tends to spill over into every facet of our lives and promotes a perpetual reluctance to embrace anything that involves change, growth or risk. Our amygdala wants us to be what we’ve always been and stay just the way we are. So unless we choose to intentionally override this brain tendency, we’re destined to repeat the past.

One of the most effective ways to get past this limitation (i.e., to change) is to come up with simple mechanisms—what I call “practices”—that help us stand apart from the crowd and create what we want to become. In other words, we make lasting change through a succession of small specific steps or choices each day.

In my experience with teams, athletics, and life, traveling throughout the country, I often hear the phrase that a manager, leader, or team needs to “rise to the occasion.” I learned much about this aspect of leadership in my martial art practice of Aikido, where I rigorously train. Much like Aikido, where we learn to adapt to the pressures we encounter, we are always tested with pressures and strain. But actually whether in leadership or in Aikido, in times when we’re most tested by pressure or strain, we don’t rise to the occasion—we sink to the level of our practice. It’s our unconscious patterns that arise in those moments—what we’ve been practicing—whether positive or negative.

It’s easy enough to set up a practice of routines to support the changes we want to make. Yet, too quickly these routines can become mechanical tasks. We either procrastinate, feeling like we’ve “fallen off the wagon,” or we over-do, feeling like we’re “treading water”—doing, doing, doing but not seeing real shifts or progress.

1. To shift this, ask yourself the following questions:

   - For the sake of what am I practicing?
• “What am I committed to?”

Reflect on these questions and listen. Observe where your thoughts go and ask the questions again. Begin to articulate what you “are a commitment to.” The way I answer that question is that “I’m a commitment to helping people develop the inner wisdom, strength, and heart to become inspiring and trusted leaders.” It’s for the sake of this that I practice. It’s for the sake of this that I get up in the morning. When I run five miles or I step on the mat and bow in or I practice deep listening and openness during a difficult conversation, I practice for the sake of something. What is the vision you have for your life, family, team, company, or community? Is it about providing for your family? Building your business? Challenge yourself to clarify what this is for you. And also recognize that it could change weekly or monthly.

2. The next step is to state your commitment before you engage or as you begin to engage in a given practice, and again after you finish your practice. Sometimes I say it to myself and sometimes I speak it out loud. As I enter into a practice with a clear sense of my commitment, knowing “for the sake of what” I am practicing it, that knowledge brings much more relevance to my practice; simply because I am connecting my deeper care, or what matters to me, with what I am practicing. It turns my actions into purposeful practice versus just another task to check off the list.

3. Notice what mood or emotion emerges in your practice. Are you feeling more purposeful, more resourceful, more engaged, or more present? Compare that to when you do not make your declaration before and after your practice. What mood emerges then, and what’s your energy like?

**Wright**

In the midst of the pressure situations, stress, and feelings of “overwhelm” that many of us face, what can we be practicing?

**Blessing**

**Practice Number 2: Regain Your Balance Under Pressure—Cultivating a Centered Presence**

There is little debate about the importance for leaders to regain their balance under pressure and strain. This practice is provoked out of the leadership question I raised earlier: what is it to be a human being? Human beings have nervous systems and we
are constantly being triggered. This is deeply rooted in our biology. Life is a series of encounters for us to respond to. As one of my teachers once shared with me, an encounter is an encounter, is an encounter. Whether it’s a conversation, oncoming traffic, a gust of wind in our face, someone with aggressive energy, or a difficult conversation, all of these encounters trigger our nervous system. If the oncoming energy is negative, that trigger may last longer—longer than we would like, and longer than what serves us.

As our buttons are pushed, our bodies respond by contracting. We might find our breathing tends to rise into the upper part of our chest or perhaps our breath gets shallow or our pitch gets higher or our shoulders get a bit more rounded. We may cross our arms over our chest. We may clench our jaw. These are all signs of contraction.

It is how we respond to those encounters that defines our life experience. So what happens? Most leaders will do what they historically have done. And if it works, great. But what happens when it doesn’t work?

We often hear people say, “Well you need to bite your tongue.” But how? How can I regain my balance under pressure and strain? How can I regain my balance when I’m triggered, when I’m provoked? In many cases, we can’t think our way out of it because by the time we’re triggered we’re not thinking straight. We “get grabbed” by a situation that happened and just can’t shake it. So these triggers affect our entire system, thus becoming a whole system experience.

When we’re triggered, we’re out of balance or off-center. Centering is a process of collecting ourselves. It’s a way of being in the present moment—being present to what we care about and being present to our purpose, being present to the world. This is an inward practice (though not self-centered) that allows us to attend to what’s going on in our system, what’s going on with our thoughts, what’s going on with our moods, and what’s going on with our sensations.

Though relatively unknown in the areas of management, leadership, and relationships, the practice of centering has been around for hundreds and hundreds of years through the many traditions and forms of the martial arts. That makes sense, since centering puts us into a more relaxed state of readiness, and the more relaxed readiness we are, the more powerful we are. When I am in a state of what I call “relaxed power,” my attention and intention are completely here in this moment. And when I’m completely present, I increase my possibilities for action. I’m more in choice in the moment and I have many more moves available to me. Through this practice we develop our ability to observe ourselves under pressure and strain that stops fear from taking us.
By the practice of cultivating a centered presence, you can significantly reduce the time that a triggering situation (or “grab”) has on you.

Wright

How do I practice cultivating a centered presence?

Blessing

Whether you’re a participant or spectator in sports, you’re already familiar with this concept, even if you haven’t used the term. For example, look at the skillful athletes who play tennis, basketball, football, baseball, wrestling, and hockey. How do these athletes position themselves in order to maximize their available options or possibilities? Picture them now. Look at the positioning of their bodies when the most possibilities emerge. They are generally down in a more crouched position with their center of gravity lower. Their confidence is high. This practice produces a capacity for action that increases possibilities for themselves and their teammates.

However, a similar practice to regain balance under pressure in the world of management, leadership, and relationships has been scarce.

THE PRACTICE: 5-PART CENTERED PRESENCE

To begin this five-part centering practice, we bring into our awareness the laws of gravity—we have a vertical dimension, a horizontal dimension, and a front and back dimension.

1. Vertical dimension: Stand or sit with your feet shoulder-width apart, gaze lightly on the horizon. Imagine a vertical line running north and south through your body, running from the ground up through your perineum all the way up through the crown of your head. The bottom half of your vertical dimension connects you to the Earth and is a source of stability. The upper part of your vertical line runs through the crown of your head and up to the sky. It is your connection to ultimately what matters to you, what you care about, and to your higher power—whatever that is for you. Now imagine yourself two inches taller. Relax your arms by your side with your shoulders squared off and your knees loose—not locked. Relax your jaw, also. Wiggle your toes and feel the earth beneath you. Now extend your energy up to the sky. Now shift your attention back to your feet on the ground. Shift back and forth a couple times and find your balance point between the two.
2. **Horizontal dimension:** This is the dimension that moves from left to right. This is a dimension that encompasses our circle of influence—our relationships. So as you’re standing or sitting in your chair with your feet shoulder-width apart, begin to shift your weight from your left foot to your right foot. Begin to shift your energy back and forth from your left foot to your right a couple of times, and find a balance point between the two. And so what we’ve done so far is to find the vertical line—feeling the earth beneath you and the sky above you, and finding a balance point between up and down. And now, with your horizontal line, you found a balance point between left and right.

3. **Front and back line:** To align yourself with your front and back points, begin again with your legs shoulder-width apart. Now shift your energy front to your toes and then back on your heels, and front on your toes and then back on your heels and find the midpoint between those two.

4. **Breathe:** Take a breath and relax. Loosen your jaw and lightly touch your tongue on the roof of your mouth. Allow your breath to sink into your lower belly.

5. **Check-in:** Ask yourself this question: what do I care about right here, right now in this moment? Listen to your answer as you speak it to yourself. This question has a powerful way of bringing us back to our center.

This is what I call a life practice—a practice you can take with you anywhere, anytime. It takes about fifteen to twenty seconds. You can do it in the middle of a conversation, you can do it from your seat at a conference table, you can do it while you walk down the street, or you can do it while you’re in your car. There are endless possibilities for practice.

Practice five to ten times a day for two weeks, and at the end of two weeks, record what you’re noticing and learning about yourself. Continue your practice indefinitely, increasing the number of times you center during the day. Over the next four weeks, work up to ten to fifteen times per day. Remember that it takes three hundred repetitions to achieve muscle memory, and three thousand repetitions to fully embody a new skill. At the end of that four weeks, ask yourself these three questions:
1. What am I learning about myself?
2. What mood is now produced when I center?
3. What possibilities do I see when I am in this state of centered presence?

A key point here is that the best time to utilize this practice isn’t necessarily when you’re grabbed or triggered (though if you do happen to remember to center in those moments, great). When you’re just beginning to practice, you can’t expect to have the automatic response of centering. The point is to practice recurrently, again and again and again, in low-risk situations. That way, when it’s “game time,” your new practice will already be a habit.

When a particularly challenging situation triggers or “grabs” you, this practice may not be rigorous enough to shake loose the triggered state. In these cases, intense exercise may be the answer. For me sometimes, that’s running five to six miles. Others pound a pillow with a baseball bat or get outside and scream at the top of their lungs. Some people engage in yoga or meditation. The good news is that there are options available for all of us.

**Wright**

What do leaders need to watch out for?

**Blessing**

Leaders need to find a way to see the things they’ve been blind to—the elephants in the room.

**Practice Number 3: Attention to Your Blindness—Leadership is a Contact Sport**

Leadership is a relationship. The most important participants in this relationship are the leader and his or her colleague. To the extent that we are “blind” or unaware of our “blind spots,” our leadership is undermined at every turn. This self-deception is one of the most central issues of leadership today, and addressing it can be quite liberating for us, given we all live in some form of blindness.

When we think an issue belongs to someone else, we continue to push harder and blame others, shifting our attention off ourselves onto someone or something else. Often times, we can’t see that we are at the heart of the issue or that we’re somehow contributing to the issue. We just do “that thing we do”—the automatic response
we’ve learned through unconscious practicing. That blinds us to the true cause of many of our challenges and limits the solutions that we come up with. Our perspective is skewed by our blindness.

It’s time to call the elephants in the room what they are, and support leaders with a simple, powerful practice that gives them leverage in building their capacity to influence, build teams, reduce feelings of conflict, increase meaning and satisfaction, sharpen your vision and purpose, and deepen your happiness.

So many people have an adverse response to the phrase, “I don’t know.” We feel a pressure—whether it’s spoken or unspoken—to have all of the answers at work and at home. How do you feel about answering a question with “I don’t know”? How do you feel when others respond that way? How can this statement about not knowing also contain key elements of knowing?

“I don’t know.”

It’s possible to know that we don’t know (I call this ignorance). It’s also possible to not know that we don’t know (I call this blindness). My claim is that all of us operate in some degree of blindness all the time. For example, what are the consequences on my learning if I don’t know that I don’t know economics? How many questions will I ever ask you about economics?

Our relationships are where we deal with our blindness. This is why I say that leadership is a contact sport. We need to begin a practice where we’re not resisting others. One powerful leadership strategy is where you get recurrent 360 degree feedback from subordinates, direct reports, colleagues at your own level, and colleagues above you. It creates an expanded view of ourselves versus a place of contraction or resistance. It may be challenging for many of us to ask for assessments on our leadership. The more we see people as our equals, the more this resistance will diminish, giving us the opportunity to engage in this most meaningful conversation of leadership.

Consistent follow-up to solicit continuous assessment feedback and ideas for improvement is imperative. The research on leadership development concludes that personal contact supports us in developing our influence and effectiveness as leaders. Peter Drucker has said, “The leader of the past was a person who knew how to tell. The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask.”

The key to changing our behavior and increasing leadership impact is to seek out feedback, modify our behavior based on that feedback, and sustain those changes through recurrent practice.

Wright
How can we get this information from our colleagues?

**Blessing**

Here is the practice:

1. Select two areas of desired improvement. These may come out of discussions with your colleagues or boss, or from an assessment instrument.

2. Identify five people in your circle of influence with whom you have regular contact. Include people who are on your level, above you, and below you.

3. Schedule recurrent conversations with these colleagues (once each every three weeks for six months), with the specific agenda of discussing your learning and development.

   - Meet with each colleague once every three weeks, for ten to fifteen minutes at a time (a total of a seventy-five-minute investment for you every month).
   - Inform them of a specific behavior you would like to shift, focusing on one or two areas of improvement *only*.
   - Ask them to observe this behavior in you during the next three weeks and provide an assessment at your next meeting.
   - At your next meeting, ask them to speak about the behavior they have been observing. Have they seen anything shift in your behavior? Be sure to request that they provide specific examples that will ground their assessment in evidence.

**Wright**

You’ve talked already about some important communication strategies. What else can we focus on to increase our leadership impact?

**Blessing**

**Practice Number 4: Listen for Possibilities**

Many of us already know that communication is more about listening than speaking. Whether we are speaking or listening, we are always provoking one another. This is part of our biology and what it is to be a human being. Bringing more awareness to this brings choice. With a better understanding of our choices, we can create different possibilities for action. We can choose what to practice, given we are
always practicing something. Through advances in neuroscience, we now know that we only hear what we listen for and pay particular attention to what we are expecting to hear, see, feel, or taste. We listen to substantiate our existing judgments about a person. As managers and leaders, we must listen to people in a new way, which will help them grow or enhance their performance.

I have identified four “mindset clutterbugs” that decrease our capacity to listen openly. Once we are aware of these, we can choose to do something about them (e.g., regaining our balance or clarity by centering [Practice Number 2]). Here are the four mindset clutterbugs:

1. **Agendas**—When we’re lost in our own agenda, we can’t see the possibilities of another person.
2. **World view**—Your unique lens, eyes, or filters through which you see the world. This is part of being human; we all have them. While we’re generally unaware of our own, we unconsciously try to superimpose our view of the world onto others.
3. **Hot buttons**—When our buttons are pushed, we lose our balance, literally contracting in to a smaller space. Here there are fewer possibilities, unhelpful emotions, and diminished capacity for listening.
4. **Details**—In order to listen for possibilities in others, we must stay above the details. We can’t see through the clouds, so we need to stay above them. Instead of asking a direct report, “Why did you_____last week?” ask him or her, “How can I best help you learn from last week’s situation?” without getting into the details.
When leaders listen for possibilities, they listen in a way wherein they see people as people, not as objects; as whole, not as broken; as equals, not as subordinates; as fellow humans, not as separate beings. Leaders see others in their humanness.

It’s not just about seeing the positive in people, it’s about believing in others completely. You can support others in being the best they can be, simply through your listening. You can help things go right instead of dealing with the things that are going wrong. It’s not only a way of listening, it’s a way of being with other people that allows this form of listening to arise.

Leaders listening for possibilities treat others as if they have all the tools they need to be successful. When we listen to people in this way, what’s likely to happen is they will come to their own insights. And as they do this, they are much more motivated to move into action to create successes and improve their performance.

The practice: select one or all of three of these different practices:

1. Part A: For three weeks, take five to ten minutes at the end of each work day to journal your reflections about how you listened to others in these four aspects:

   1. What agenda did you have, if any, that you listened from?
   2. What filter(s) did you have that you listened from, if any?
   3. What hot buttons did you notice you had that you listened from, if any?
   4. What details sucked you in from which you listened, if any?

   Part B: During the first day of each of the next three weeks, a) look ahead to some of the key conversations you will be having, b) reflect on this question, and c) journal your answer:

   - As you prepare to listen, what do you currently see in your mindset’s:
     ○ Agenda?
     ○ World view?
     ○ Hot buttons?
     ○ Details?

2. Practice asking any of these five questions during conversations with others:
   1. How can I best help you think this through?
   2. Do you have a sense of a possible path you want to take, and would you like to explore that with me?
Yes You Can

3. How would you like to use me in this matter? Would you like me to be a sounding board?
4. What are the main insights you have had about this matter up until now?
5. Can you look at this situation from some different angles?

3. Part A: Select one conversation each day and practice listening in one of these three ways below. Within one work week, make sure to practice each method at least once.
   1. Listen with complete disinterest. Do not pay any attention to the speaker.
   2. Listen for what’s wrong with what this person is saying, and point it out to him or her.
   3. Listen as though what’s coming out of the person’s mouth is pure gold! It’s the answer to life that you’ve been waiting for!

   Part B: After each of these conversations, answer these questions in writing:
   - What you where able to see or not see based on the way you listened?
   - What emotions emerged for you in the conversation?
   - What was your physical posture and how were you oriented to the speaker?
   - What sensations did you notice in your body?
Wright

How do you help leaders deal with conflict?

Blessing

Practice Number 5: The Art of Blending

Blending is an essential leadership competency that we can learn any time and practice for a lifetime. It draws on the Japanese martial art of Aikido, which I have been practicing for many years. On the mat, I was able to see how my encounters with practice partners translated to my off-mat conversations. It was here where I first learned the principles of blending and their relevance to building effective relationships.

Operationalizing blending is when you join with the incoming energy of your “attacker” instead of struggling against him or her, so you can use the person’s power to transform the conflict into harmony. Blending is a practical way to coordinate effectively with others everywhere, not just in the workplace.

This isn’t to say that we should always blend. Blending is not the answer for every situation, but it’s relevant to develop the skill so that when we need to, we can make the move.

While it’s unlikely you will be pushed physically in the workplace, the odds are pretty high that someone will move aggressively toward you verbally or psychologically. And what do you do when someone pushes your buttons? Most of us will push back, pull, or dodge. Let’s look at the possible outcomes of these reactions: you can win, you can lose, or there can be a stalemate. None of these are really conducive to harmony or mutual satisfaction.

When we respond by blending, enter into the energy of the other person slightly “offline” of their attack (point of view). This allows you to see the situation from the other person’s perspective without giving up your own! This is essential. Giving up your own to see theirs is over-blending and generally not effective. Blending is not simply giving in.

A blending response is quite disarming to someone, leaving him or her no target to focus on. In that instant, multiple options present themselves—including the possibility for mutual satisfaction or reconciliation. As we blend, we increase the possibility for connection. Blending is not about winning but about creating a win/win—mutual satisfaction for both parties.
Blending can produce immediate results, but blending under pressure takes lots of practice. I suggest beginning the practice of blending in conversations with low risk. As you get more practiced with it, then you practice the move in more challenging conversations.

The practice:

Choose one conversation per day to practice for the first week. In the second week, practice twice daily, and in the third week, three times daily. Your objective is to transform conflict into harmony, producing mutual satisfaction.

1. First, center yourself. It is almost impossible to blend well when you’ve lost your balance and you are contracted in your body.
2. Move toward the other person.
3. See the other person’s viewpoint, without giving up your own. See and feel his or her interpretations.
4. When blending, do it authentically, from the heart. Do it from a place of your truth, not out of obligation or time pressure. Blending must be an honest understanding of another person’s feelings, interpretations, and intentions. (You may paraphrase back to them what you heard.)
5. Before concluding your conversation, ask the other person if he or she is satisfied with the conversation and listen. Express your satisfaction as well.

Wright

How can leaders address breakdowns in communication and coordination in teams?

Blessing

Practice Number 6: Be a Good Customer

Conversations are the currency with which we move through life. In fact, conversation in Latin means “changing together.” To create effective conversations for the coordination of action, we must recognize there are two roles we play at any given time—that of customer and performer.

Bob Dunham, founder of the Institute of Generative Leadership, says effective leaders act as customers for the promises of their team and their team members. In order for leaders to increase their impact, they must demonstrate the competency to manage the network of conversations with their colleagues and teams. So coordinating
action with others and doing it effectively is a foundational practice of management and leadership.

On the other hand, most leaders are clear about the importance of being an effective performer. In many of our organizations, if you are an effective performer, you are rewarded accordingly and perceived as a good leader. Conversely, most leaders live in blindness about how they could be a more effective customer, and thus how this can increase their impact as a leader. My claims are that 1) if you are not an effective customer, you are not demonstrating leadership and 2) you cannot be an effective leader unless you are a good customer.

It is through our promises that action is shaped. In our role as leader or manager, we must responsibly manage not only the promises we make (a no-brainer), but as importantly, the promises (commitments) of others. The more we can create an effective promise with others, the greater the chance we will realize not only the results we want, but a mutually satisfying outcome for all.

The practice:

As a customer for the promises of others (a necessary competency of leadership), we are responsible for having recurrent and effective conversations with performers.

1. *Make effective requests.* Leaders make requests to get promises from performers. If their requests are effective, it increases the likelihood for an effective promise resulting in effective coordination and getting the results you desire. Understand that leaders make requests when they see the future unfolding in a way they don’t like.

   - Practice making two requests per day during the first week. Increase that to three per day the following week and five per day by the third week. Ensure that each request contains these three guidelines:
     - A desired outcome
     - The conditions or standards that will satisfy you (the what!)
     - A specific date (by when?)

2. *Make on-going weekly assessments* of the performer’s execution (fulfillment of his or her promise) and share your assessments in a weekly conversation specifically dedicated to this purpose. Stay focused on the conditions both of you agreed upon. Be sure to keep up this practice, even when things are going well.

3. *Help things go right with the fulfillment of your request.* Without taking on direct responsibility for the promise someone else made or jumping in to “save the
day,” follow up regularly with performers (at least once per week). Don’t leave them “hanging,” with an unspoken expectation or assumption that they are on track. Remember, you are also responsible for the fulfillment of the request, so ensure that things go right. Initiate and engage in the necessary conversations with them or the team to ensure the request is fulfilled.

Wright

Okay, Scott, my eyes have been opened to some valuable practices. What last practice can really help me take my leadership to the next level?

Blessing

**Practice Number 7: Recall Rule Number 4: Lighten Up—Don’t Take Yourself Too Bleepin’ Seriously!**

In today’s competitive environment, it is common for managers and leaders to seek predictability, control, and measurement, often displacing others in the climb to the top. One of the enemies of learning is that “knowing” has become significant, which can come with an emotional state of “heaviness” and a need to be taken seriously. We are concerned with getting our needs met at a deeper level for our survival. A joyful approach to our work and life is often forgotten and there is the absence of play.

Lightening up allows the center of the self, our authenticity, to shine through. We allow our creative nature to emerge. It drives openness and collaboration. We see ourselves as whole, sufficient, and compassionate. When we practice lightness, we let go of our grip on our entitlements and childish demands.

David Whyte says, “The antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest; the antidote to exhaustion is wholeheartedness.” What brings aliveness in you? How might you cultivate more of this aliveness daily?

As a side note, after working with a team of senior leaders on Rule Number 4, I was asked, “What are the other rules?” I responded, “There aren’t any!”

Practice:
We can practice giving ourselves a daily dose of lightness by:

1. Reflecting on *when* and in *what* way you have lightened things up for a team or another person. (Something that alters the mood present in you or others.) Determine new ways you could do this again, purposefully. (Selecting something that can sustain a resourceful mood.)
2. Selecting one new way from your list to do every day for the next week. Commit to doing it.
3. Journaling about what you observe about yourself and others. Repeat the practice indefinitely.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Blessing, MBA, PCC, founder of Inspired Leadership Now, is a sought-after leadership and executive coach known for helping successful leaders achieve positive, lasting change for themselves and their teams. With more than twenty-five years of executive management experience and a track record of substantial success as a CEO, Scott understands the pressures, relationship challenges, and isolation leaders face. His no-nonsense approach to freeing leaders from their blindness and self-deception has made Scott a trusted resource and confidant to Fortune 100 executives, entrepreneurs, and high performers with Intel, Godiva Chocolatier, AARP, Fannie Mae, National Park Service, IBM, and others.

Scott F. Blessing
Inspired Leadership Now, LLC
405 Oak Hill Lane
Wyomissing, PA 19610
610-376-3600
www.inspiredleadershipnow.com
scott@inspiredleadershipnow.com
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